WHERE IS GOD IN THIS MESS?

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"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" Isaiah 7: 14 (NRSV)

As you came to a poor young woman, startling her with unlikely, improbable news, so, O God, startle us this morning with news of your coming into history, into our lives, with love and reconciliation and renewal.

Help us, O God, to hear it all again,

as if for the first time. Amen.

One of my favorite Christmas memories is of the day long ago when, attempting to counter all the commercial hullabaloo about Santa, I

sat down at the kitchen table with one of my youngsters in the middle of December and undertook the project of assembling a cardboard cutout crèche: stable, manger, baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph, sheep, cows, shepherds, and the wise men—“fold on dotted line, place tab A in slot B.” It was a disaster; nothing worked the way it was supposed to. The kitchen table was littered with torn, bent, useless figures. Apart from Scotch tape this was not going to work. Surveying the disastrous scene on the kitchen table, the four-year-old who was my partner and to whom we were trying to explain the real meaning of Christmas—that Jesus is God’s Son—said, “So Daddy, where is God in this mess?”

It is not only one of my favorite Christmas memories, it remains the quintessential Christmas question: "Where exactly is God in this mess?" The old Karl Barth advice that a modern Christian will have an open Bible in one hand and an open newspaper in the other hand doesn't work for me. It's a mess out there. American troops are fighting the longest war in our history, continuing to die at the hands of an insurgency that will not give up and a citizenry that is, at best, ambiguous about our presence. Millions of gallons of oil have polluted one-third of the richest fishing waters in the world and continue to gush at the rate of an Exxon Valdez spill every few days. A deep and profound partisanship pervades in Washington and across the nation, a

hope-filled presidency spawns cynicism tinged with racism. LeBron James went to Miami, not Chicago, and the Cubs have a good start on their second century of futility. Where exactly is God in this mess?

The claim, of course, is that God is right there in the middle of the mess: the mess of a long journey when you are nine months' pregnant, the mess of no place to stay for the night, the mess of giving birth in a stable, the mess of a census, the mess of a political situation so fragile that any hint of a threat to the current authorities and power brokers was seen as a warrant to kill all the babies just in case, which is what King Herod did when he heard about the birth in Bethlehem. The Christian claim

is that the holy, omnipotent, omniscient creator of the universe chose to assume the limitations of human life, to enter human history in, of all things, the birth of a baby. The theologians call it the "Scandal of Particularity." It is a scandal. We prefer God off in the sky, on a throne, watching life on earth, or God as an elegant philosophic abstraction, the ground of being, the first cause, the primal mover. But a baby? God coming among us in a human birth and a human life and a human death? Where is God in this mess?

The central character is the one who conceived, carried, and bore him, Mary of Nazareth. The Gospels of Luke and Matthew introduce her very differently. The favorite is Luke's story.

Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, appears to a young woman who is engaged to a man by the name of Joseph and tells her she will bear a child, but it's not Joseph's exactly, because they are not yet married. "Do not be afraid," the angel tells Mary, which, of course, she is. It is a great moment, and artists have created incredibly rich and beautiful paintings of it. The Italian Renaissance artists were fascinated by the annunciation and painted it in gorgeous pastels: Mary is demure, holding a flower or reading a book, the angel's wings shimmering, gold, red, blue.

Matthew, on the other hand, introduces Mary peculiarly, with a genealogy. No better way to kill a good story, someone noted (Borg and

Crossan, *The First Christmas*), than with a long list of ancestors. But that is how Matthew does it… From Abraham to King David - 14 generations; then another 14 generations - David, the father of Solomon – up to the Babylonian Exile; then another 14 generations to Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

All the people in this list, this family tree, from Abraham right up to Joseph, are men, except for four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah—five counting Mary.

The first thing Matthew tells us about Mary is that she and Joseph have not had intimate relations, so all this

male family connection doesn't really matter because Joseph wasn't really Jesus' father.

So why does Matthew go through all these names of male ancestors? Might it have something to do with the four women's names in the list: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, whom Matthew simply identifies as "the wife of Uriah"? That would be the Uriah King David arranged to have killed because Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, was carrying David's child.

Princeton scholar Katherine Sakenfeld says that "Matthew places Mary in an astonishing company of women" (*Blessed One*, p. 21). All four

are foreigners, outsiders. Their stories are fascinating and very messy.

Tamar **has an affair with her to-be-father-in-law.**

Rahab **is part of a great soap opera of a story. Rahab runs a brothel in Jericho. As the invading Israelites approach, Joshua sends two spies into the city to reconnoiter. They end up at Rahab's place (for what reason we are left to imagine). The King of Jericho finds out, sends his men to investigate. Rahab lies, hides the Israelite spies under a pile of leaves on the roof, and the next night she helps them escape by a rope from her upstairs window. She leaves a scarlet ribbon in the window, and the**

invading Israelites recognize it, and her house and its inhabitants are saved. Rahab's scarlet ribbon! That's really messy!

***Ruth* is a Moabite who sneaks up on a rich farmer, Boaz, in the middle of the night as he's sleeping and apparently seduces him. Outrageous, shameful, scandalous behavior in Israel. The result: Obed, King David's grandfather.**

***Bathsheba*, wife of Uriah, is the one King David sees bathing and sends for her. The result is a pregnancy and the arranged murder of her husband, then marriage, the death of the newborn, and David's shame. It doesn't get any messier than that.**

And Mary. **Astonishing company indeed.**

What these women have in common with Mary, Katherine Sakenfeld observes, is that "the four stories—and Mary—show God at work in situations that challenge ordinary human expectations and values."

Protestants aren't sure what to think about Mary. Our Roman Catholic friends call her Queen of Heaven, Mother of God, whose virginity was perpetual and whose own conception was "immaculate." Protestants simply unpack her from the Christmas box, place her in the stable beside the manger for a few weeks, and then wrap

her up and repack her and ignore her until next year.

Happily we are rediscovering Mary and reclaiming her centrality to the Christian story. We would add a counter motif to "Queen of Heaven" and "Co-Redemptrix" – her ordinariness and her marginalization: a young woman in a man's world; a young woman, unmarried and pregnant, in a world that held her guilty and could impose a death sentence by stoning for violating her engagement vows to Joseph; a poor, young, unmarried, pregnant woman.

That's who God chose to bear God's Son: to nurse him and nurture him and raise him and love the Son of God.

That's why Matthew puts her in such strange company, with four other women who "don't fit" with society's expectations and morals, five women who become themselves in unique ways, say yes to God, and become part of God's drama of salvation.

Jesus is going to "change the rules," the late William Placher wrote. "He's a king born in a stable. He is God made flesh, but his birth occasioned scandal and violence. . . . It is an embarrassed woman, some strange foreigners, and some disreputable shepherds who seem to be those with whom and through whom God is working in the birth of this human being who is also God" (*Jesus the Savior*, p. 57).

What to make of all this? You might ponder old Ahaz, so frightened he won't even ask God for help, so Isaiah takes him by the hand and says, "look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." You might begin by watching and waiting and expecting God to show up in the middle of whatever mess the life of the world and your life is.

Be open, Mary's story says. Enter what the philosopher Paul Ricœur called a "second naïveté." Become like children, wide-eyed with wonder, willing to believe. Open yourself to the unexpected and improbable and unimaginable. God comes, God appears, God works and heals and reconciles

through the likes and lives of ordinary people — people like you and me.

Mary's improbable story is an invitation never to give up the dream and hope of a warring world at peace and never to give up the dream of a divided society at one; never to give up the dream of excluded, discriminated-against, marginalized people embraced and affirmed and welcomed and included and all barriers of race, social class, gender, and, yes, sexual orientation gone, welcomed to human society as they are, ordained in the church, in leadership positions throughout society, free to enjoy all the benefits and rights of society. Mary, outsider, marginalized, is an invitation never to give up the dream of every

child of God welcomed, loved, celebrated. Mary's story is an invitation to you never to give up the dream and hope and expectation of your own broken life healed and whole.

Mary's story is a reminder that God is in the mess, this life, with you and me, in this world, this beautiful, amazing world now made holy because Mary birthed her child into it. That is an idea so simple and yet profound that sometimes we need a poet to say it for us. So Wendell Berry, going about his chores on his small farm in Kentucky on Christmas Eve, wrote,

Remembering that it happened once,
We cannot turn away the thought,
As we go out, cold, to our barns

Toward the long night’s end, that we
Ourselves are living in the world
It happened in when it first happened,
That we ourselves, opening a stall
(A latch thrown open countless times
Before), might find them breathing there,
Foreknown: the Child bedded in straw,
The mother kneeling over Him,

The husband standing in belief
He scarcely can believe, in light
That lights them from no source we see. . . .

We stand with one hand on the door,
Looking into another world
That is this world, the pale daylight
Coming just as before, our chores

To do, the cattle all awake,
Our own white frozen breath hanging
In front of us; and we are here
As we have never been before,
Sighted as not before, our place
Holy, although we knew it not.
(*A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979–1997*)

It is, finally, to trust: in the middle of the mess that is our life in the world, the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears, the successes and defeats, gains and losses, birth and death, to trust, to trust deeply the giver of it all, the God who came in the birth of a baby in Bethlehem.

A dear friend and colleague, Dana Ferguson, died two years ago. She was the Executive Associate Pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church and she battled

and fought illness courageously for several years. At the Christmas Eve service before she died – her last Christmas, Dana prayed:

> **“The cry of a baby in the night signals to us hope and salvation for all the world. We who have sat in darkness, in the shadow of death, on us light has shined. So make this place no longer what it was, Shepherd of the world’s people. Give us grace to live in health of body and health of mind. When health fails, give us grace to serve each other; give us grace to live in love. And when death comes, give us grace to comfort each other in the promise of life and give us grace to know an interval of laughter in all our waiting.”**

It is to trust the God who came in the birth of the baby of Bethlehem, wholly, utterly.

“How can this be?” Mary asked.

And Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.

Amen.